



**from** the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee  
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## **News – For Immediate for Release**

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*Editor's Note: The EOC meeting will begin at 1:00 p.m., Monday, April 9, in Room 101 of the Solomon Blatt Building (corner of Assembly and Pendleton streets.) A list of the identified schools, a technical report on this year's EOC gap analysis, and a complete copy of the report, "Climate for High Achievement: A Study of Gap-Closing Schools in South Carolina" is available online at [www.sceoc.org](http://www.sceoc.org).*

*Principals from two of the identified schools have been invited to present information about their efforts to reduce the achievement gap. They are Johnny Calder of Forestbrook Elementary in Horry County, and Shaileen Riginos, of Liberty Elementary in Pickens County. Comments from Calder and Riginos will be available online after their presentations on April 9.*

# **135 SC elementary and middle schools to be honored for reducing the achievement gap**

## ***Additional study to examine consistent honorees***

**Columbia** – Sixteen percent of South Carolina elementary and middle schools will be honored by the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee (EOC) Monday, April 9, for reducing the achievement gap for at least one historically underachieving student group.

In the fifth annual release of the gap-closing schools, 135 schools were identified based on results of the English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics portions of the 2006 Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT). The schools had high student achievement for at least one target subgroup --- African American students, Hispanic students, or students participating in the free/reduced price lunch program.

Identified as a persistent challenge nationwide, the achievement gap is defined as the difference in achievement between the target group (the historically lower-scoring demographic group) and the statewide comparison group (the historically higher-scoring group) at various PACT performance levels (Basic or Above / Proficient or Advanced.)

Highlights of this year's gap analysis reveal:

- Many of the schools recognized in previous years for closing the achievement gap have maintained their accomplishment. Twenty-seven schools will be recognized for five consecutive years.
- The analysis reveals a three-year downward trend in the achievement gap at the Basic or above level in ELA between white and African American students, which is encouraging.
- Achievement gaps observed at the Proficient or Advanced levels in ELA and math are larger than those at the Basic or above performance levels for all groups.

- In an analysis of PACT ELA and math:
  - The *smallest* achievement gap is observed in PACT math at the Basic and above level (19.2 percentage points) comparing the performance of white and Hispanic students.
  - The *largest* achievement gap is observed in PACT math at the Proficient and Advanced level (28.9 percentage points) comparing the performance of white and African American students.
  - The *second largest gap* (28.3 percentage points) is observed for pay lunch vs. free- or reduced-price lunch students, in PACT math at the Proficient and Advanced level.
- An increase occurs in all observed achievement gaps in math, with the exception of the gap between white and Hispanic students at the Basic or Above level, which decreases almost one percentage point from 2005.
- Performance on the science and social studies PACT tests is analyzed in this year's report but schools will not be recognized for achievement in these content areas. The gaps in these subject areas should be noted.
  - The gaps in science achievement between white and African American students are the largest of all in the demographic comparisons of all the PACT tests in 2006.
  - The gaps in social studies achievement between white and Hispanic students are the smallest of all in the demographic comparisons of all the PACT tests in 2006.
- Overall, there is a decrease in the number of schools recognized this year (138 schools identified in 2005), reflecting limited progress observed in PACT math in 2006.

This year's gap release again provides ample evidence that high performance levels can be achieved in high-poverty schools. Thirty percent of this year's honored schools are high-poverty schools, serving a student population of at least 70 percent poverty. Sixty-six percent of honored schools serve a population of at least 50 percent poverty.

EOC Research Director David Potter, who conducts the annual gap study, again emphasizes the need for parents, educators, and the community to take strong, positive roles in the lives of young people and within schools in order to meet goals set for student achievement.

"Schools *can* be successful in raising the achievement levels of all students to a high level regardless of the risk factors students bring to school with them," states Potter. "It takes involvement, commitment and a complete focus on the individual needs of students."

One of the recommendations issued in the gap report the past two years suggests focusing attention on students falling behind in school and providing for their needs. One of the suggested strategies is to "increase instructional time for these students."

Johnny Calder, principal of Forestbrook Elementary, affirms this strategy, referring to it as his school's "safety net." Forestbrook Elementary has been recognized as a gap-closer for five consecutive years.

"Students learn differently and at different paces," said Calder. "We provide them adequate time to master the skills they need by providing tutorials before, during, and after school."

In an effort to foster improvement efforts statewide, a study examining schools recognized four consecutive years for reducing the gap will also be released to the EOC on April 9. The study, which examines the characteristics of 26 elementary schools using school report card indicators and school climate survey gathered from students, parents, and teachers, highlights the important role of a positive school climate that fosters the attainment of high student performance.

Some of the study's findings are:

- Teachers in gap-closing schools expressed more favorable opinions of schools, especially in the area of home-school relations. They also view teacher and staff morale as positive.

- Parents in gap-closing schools tend to be more active in the schools as volunteers and rate the schools higher for their efforts to engage parents. They saw fewer “obstacles to active participation” and they tended to view students as “better behaved.”
- Students in gap-closing schools were more satisfied with the social-physical environment than students in others schools, agreeing more often that students “behaved well in class” and that bathrooms at school “are kept clean.”
- Gap-closing schools serve more middle-income students, more gifted students, and fewer students more than two years older than the typical age for pupils at the grade level.
- The 26 gap-closing schools included in the study are located in only 15 of the 85 school districts.
- Three of the 26 gap-closers have poverty indexes higher than 70 percent.

Diane Monrad, Director of the South Carolina Educational Policy Center, notes that in addition to maintaining an instructional environment that supports high achievement, “several variables such as caring relationships, school climate, faculty morale, and strong leadership were associated with successful schools.” Gap-closing schools received an Absolute rating of Excellent or Good more frequently than other schools.

“A favorable school climate provides the structure within which student, teachers, administrators, and parents function cooperatively and constructively,” states Monrad. “Relationships, mutual respect, and communication are critical to success. The good news is that schools can do something to improve these things.”

Principals and staff from many of the recognized schools will be present on April 9 to be recognized by the EOC. In addition to Calder, Shaileen Riginos from Liberty Elementary in Pickens County will present information about strategies and programs in their schools that they believe are reasons for their schools’ successes.

*The EOC is an independent, non-partisan group made up of 18 educators, business persons, and elected officials who are appointed by the legislature and governor to monitor and review the implementation of the 1998 South Carolina Education Accountability Act, the Education Improvement Act, and the K-12 system.*

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